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ABSTRACT

To determine if there are significant differences between the first-semester freshman composition grading standards of public two-year and four-year institutions in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, a composition instrument was mailed to 120 freshman composition directors from two-year and four-year member institutions. The instrument contained combinations of seven grammatical and eight nongrammatical elements of written compostion. The directors were asked to grade the essays according to departmental writing standards for students completing one semester of freshman composition. Comparative analysis of the 58 instruments which were returned showed close agreement on the quality of writing. In addition, both groups rated development of the idea and overall theme organization to be the most important non-grammatical elements of composition. Both groups felt that paragraph organization, sentence structure, and transition were the second most important non-grammatical elements of composition. Sentence fragments, mixed errors, and subject-verb agreement errors were rated the most severe grammatical errors by both groups. In conclusion, no significant differences were found between the first semester composition grading standards of the two-year and four-year institutions. (Author/JAG)

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A COMPARISON OF FRESHMAN COMPOSITION GRADING STANDARDS BETWEEN PUBLIC TWO-YEAR AND FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

One generally agrees that the student entering higher education who writes effectively will probably have less difficulty succeeding in courses requiring writing than the student who does not write satisfactorily. One, however, cannot easily define, to any generally accepted degree, what "effective" writing is. Even the freshman composition instructor, who is allegedly trained to teach writing, may have somewhat different criteria for effective writing from a colleague in his or her own profession. A student-written English composition, for example, may be judged satisfactory by one instructor while that same composition evaluated by another instructor may be considered unsatisfactory or even excellent. Scully (1975) has cited Dr. Elizabeth Cowan, the former head of the Association of Departments of English of the Modern Language Association, as stating that there is no standard definition of the term "good writing." Cohen (1973) has stated that one reason more research is needed in composition in the junior college is English instructors' apparent inability to agree on what constitutes good writing. Diverse grading criteria used by composition teachers in higher education become problematic for the planners of the composition curriculum. In the two-year college, planning the composition curriculum becomes especially difficult in the transfer programs. Two-year college instructors formulating objectives for the fresh-

man composition courses for the transfer student often attempt initially to reach consensus among themselves, but such agreement does not generally suffice. Because the student in question has elected to transfer to a senior institution, the curriculum committee must also be attuned to the writing expectations of the four-year college or university. Inevitably the "standards" of the two types of institutions must be considered, some two-year instructors maintaining their transfer curriculum should equal the freshman composition standards of the four-year institutions, some teachers viewing the writing expectations of the senior college instructors as unimportant, yet most agreeing to the vagueness of composition standards of both types of institutions. Thus the members of the curriculum committee of the two-year college are often not only uncertain about their own composition standards but also about those standards of the four-year colleges to which their students plan to transfer.

The need for better articulation between the two-year and four-year colleges regarding standards in freshman composition has been frequently identified in composition literature. One of the recommendations of the Tempe Conference (1965), which was concerned with two-year college English teaching, was that studies should be jointly undertaken by two-year and four-year college representatives to recommend basic goals and requirements for a freshman course appropriate for students in both institutions. The Joint Committee Report of the National Council of Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition nd Communication (1965) emphasized the need for more articulation between two-year and four-year colleges so that two-year colleges might know what proficiencies four-year colleges expect their transfer students to have. In its Explication of the Recommendations section, the National Study of English in the Junior College (1968-69)

urged that two-year English departments, as well as graduate English departments and professional associations, receive financial and professional support to provide continued cooperation between the English departments of the two-year and four-year institutions.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem of this study was to research the first-semester freshman composition grading standards of both two-year and four-year public institutions of higher education in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

This study attempted to answer the following question: Are there significant differences between the first-semester freshman composition grading standards of public two-year and four-year institutions of higher education in member institutions of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools?

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study was to determine if significant differences existed between the freshman composition grading standards of two-year and four-year colleges in public member institutions of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. To accomplish this, a composition instrument was designed. Three composition instructors--the director of freshman composition at a public university, the director of composition at a private university, and the director of developmental English at a public two-year college--were selected to assist in the construction and validation of the design. The instructor at the two-year institution, an expert in developmental composition, was requested to submit

what she considered to be the most important non-grammatical (rhetorical) elements of written composition. Eight elements were submitted: word choice, sentence structure, paragraph organization, transition, development of the idea, general style, overall theme organization, and originality. This instructor, moreover, was requested to submit what she considered to be the most prevalent grammatical errors committed by first-semester composition student. Seven errors were chosen: misplaced modifiers, pronoun-antecedent errors, subject-verb agreement errors, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, spelling errors, and tense shifting.

The researcher, also a teacher of first-semester composition, having been submitted eight non-grammatical and seven grammatical elements, then perused several themes written by students in his composition classes over 4 semesters and selected one which was to comprise the major portion of the composition instrument. This theme, entitled "Visiting a Foreign Country," was slightly modified by the researcher and from it the first version of a composition instrument was designed. This version was designed to isolate the eight non-grammatical and seven grammatical elements which were submitted by the two-year college instructor in such a way that the researcher could easily determine the importance of these elements in instructors' evaluation of the composition. In entirety, the instrument consisted of the modified student theme, called "Theme 1," with instructions for respondents to read it and assign it a letter grade A, B, C, D, or F; a seven-point rating scale with instructions for the respondents to assess the importance of the eight stated non-grammatical elements in their evaluation of Theme 1; and seven variations of Theme 1 (Themes 2 through 8), each variation reflecting the inclusion of one of the seven grammatical errors (frequency of each type of error committed

in a theme ranged from 4 to 8), with instructions for the respondents to assign each theme a letter grade of A,B,C,D, or F.

The student whose theme had been selected for the research study was written for permission to use the theme. After the student had responded affirmatively, the instrument was then mailed to the freshman composition director at the private university who concurred with the choice of the eight non-grammatical and seven grammatical elements, the frequency of each type of error committed, but suggested the themes be assessed on a 4.0 grading scale. The research design was then sent to the freshman composition director of a public university. This director also agreed with the choice of the eight non-grammatical and seven grammatical elements, the frequency of each type of error committed, and the 4.0 grading scale, but recommended that another composition variation be evaluated as part of the instrument. This composition variation would contain a combination of all the grammatical errors reflected in the previous seven compositions. This suggestion was included in the design, adding Theme 9 which consisted of one of each of the seven grammatical errors and instructions for the respondents to read and evaluate the theme on a 4.0 scale.

The revised instrument was then mailed back to the private university director and the public two-year college director for their approval of the revisions. The revisions were approved by both directors.

DESCRIPTION OF THE POPULATION

The subjects of the study consisted of a random sample of 120 freshman composition directors, sixty from public two-year institutions and sixty from public four-year institutions. Three references were used in the selection of the sample: (1) the Proceedings of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools,

(2) a special issue of the journal, College Composition and Communication, which listed the directors of freshman English programs in the nation's colleges and universities, and (3) the Yearbook of Higher Education.

From the Proceedings the eleven states comprising the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools were determined: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. In the College Composition and Communication directory those institutions were noted which the Proceedings designated as member institutions. In the directory, moreover, those institutions were identified which the Yearbook designated as public. From the directory a list was compiled consisting of those freshman English program directors from public two-year and four-year institutions in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. These names and their respective institutions were sorted into two groups: freshman English directors from public two-year colleges and freshman English directors from public four-year institutions. From these two groups the samples for the pilot study and final research study were randomly selected.

PILOT STUDY

The pretest and pilot study began with the mailing of the composition instrument and a letter of transmittal to twelve freshman composition directors, or 10 percent of the planned sample. Six composition instruments were mailed to two-year college directors and six instruments were sent to four-year institution directors. The names of these individuals were randomly drawn from the same population from which the subjects for the research study were drawn. These individuals were instructed to assess the compositions in the instrument according to their

departmental writing standards or according to their own criteria for effective writing, if their department had no specific standards. Freshman composition directors were naturally selected since they should be most familiar with any existing departmental grading standards. These directors, moreover, were asked to evaluate the compositions assuming that they represented the achievement level of students at the end of first-semester composition. In the letter of transmittal, the pilot study participants were asked to write any comments which might be of value in establishing research procedures for the study. Five, or 42 percent, of the members of the pilot study participated. The few written comments from the respondents were assessed and no revisions were made on the instrument.

RESEARCH STUDY

For the research study 120 composition instruments with instructions and 120 letters of transmittal were mailed to the sixty randomly selected two-year college directors and to the sixty randomly selected four-year institution directors. A total of twenty-seven instruments (45 percent of the sample) were returned by the two-year group and thirty-one instruments (52 percent of the sample) were returned by the four-year group.

HYPOTHESES

Seventeen null hypotheses were formulated for testing to determine whether significant differences existed in the first-semester freshman composition grading standards between both types of institutions. The following hypotheses were tested: There is no significant difference between two-year and four-year college instructors in public institutions of the Southern Association of

Colleges and Schools in their evaluation of a composition with respect to (1) no specified criteria, (2) word choice, (3) sentence structure, (4) paragraph organization, (5) transition, (6) development of the idea, (7) general style, (8) overall theme organization, (9) originality, (10) misplaced modifiers, (11) pronoun-antecedent errors, (12) run-on sentence., (13) sentence fragments, (14) spelling errors, (15) subject-verb agreement errors, (16) tense shifting, and (17) mixed errors (a combination of grammatical errors 10 through 16). All seventeen hypotheses were accepted at the 5 percent level, affirming that no significant differences existed between the grading standards of two-year and four-year institutions. (See Table 1).

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Since the purpose of this research study was to determine if significant differences existed between the composition grading standards of two-year and four-year institutions, the t-Test for a difference between two independent means was applied. The 5 percent level of significance was chosen.

FINDINGS

As shown in Table 1, from the testing of seventeen hypotheses, it was found that the grading standards for first-semester freshman composition did not differ significantly in the public two-year and public four-year institutions of higher education in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Those aspects of a composition tested for significant differences included (1) the evaluation of a composition without specified grading criteria, (2) the importance of eight

Table I

Means, t-Values, and Degrees of Freedom as Calculated from the Seventeen Items on the Composition Instruments

Criteria for evaluation	Mean of scores assigned by respondents		Calculated t-values	df	Table t-values needed for significant difference
	Two-year group	Four-year group			
1) No specified criteria[a]	3.36	3.17	1.02	54	2.01
2) Word Choice[b]	3.81	4.35	1.38	56[c]	2.00
3) Sentence Structure	4.78	4.90	.27	56	2.00
4) Paragraph Organization	5.15	5.03	.24	56	2.00
5) Transition	4.41	4.62	.45	54	2.01
6) Development of the Idea	5.78	5.16	1.29	56	2.00
7) General Style	3.85	4.29	.95	53	2.01
8) Overall Theme Organization	5.30	5.58	.55	56	2.00
9) Originality	4.08	3.66	.75	53	2.01
10) Misplaced Modifiers[d]	2.60	2.71	.65	54	2.01
11) Pronoun-Antecedent Errors	2.42	2.35	.39	55	2.01
12) Run-on Sentence Errors	1.83	1.98	.80	56	2.00
13) Sentence Fragments	1.25	1.47	.99	55	2.01
14) Spelling Errors	1.86	1.85	.04	55	2.01
15) Subject-Verb Agreement Errors	1.69	1.79	.47	55	2.01
16) Tense Shifting	1.91	1.85	.29	55	2.01
17) Mixed Errors	1.58	1.53	.22	55	2.01

[a]Item 1 was evaluated on the typical 4.0 grading scale.

[b]Items 2 through 9 were evaluated on a seven-point scale (seven representing the greatest importance, one representing the least importance).

[c]On some composition instruments criteria were not evaluated by some of the participants. The degrees of freedom, therefore, vary among various criteria.

[d]Items 10 through 17 were evaluated on the typical 4.0 grading scale.

non-grammatical elements (word choice, sentence structure, paragraph organization, transition, development of the idea, general style, overall theme organization, and originality) in the evaluation of a composition, (3) the evaluation of compositions, each including one of the following grammatical errors: misplaced modifiers, pronoun-antecedent errors, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, spelling errors, subject-verb agreement errors, tense shifting, and mixed errors.

From the means of both groups additional information was obtained. Close agreement existed between two-year and four-year institutions concerning the quality and writing level of a theme written at the end of first-semester freshman composition. Given a theme (Theme 1), supposedly representing the achievement level of a student at the end of first-semester composition, and given instructions to evaluate it on a four-point grading scale, both groups assigned grades producing averages which differed by less than two-tenths of one point.

The two-year and the four-year institutions also tended to agree on the significance of the non-grammatical aspects of composition. Given eight non-grammatical elements and instructed to assess the importance of these elements in their evaluation of Theme 1 on a seven-point scale, the two-year group rated in descending order of importance: (1) development of the idea, (2) overall theme organization, (3) paragraph organization, (4) sentence structure, (5) transition, (6) originality, (7) general style, and (8) word choice. Given the same non-grammatical elements and instructions, the four-year group rated in descending order of importance: (1) overall theme organization, (2) development of the idea, (3) paragraph organization, (4) sentence structure, (5) transition, (6) word choice, (7) general style, and (8) originality.

Given eight variations of Theme 1 (seven variations with one type of grammatical error and one variation with a combination of the seven types of grammatical errors) and

instructions to evaluate these themes on a four-point scale, the two-year group graded the following errors in descending order of severity: (1) sentence fragments, (2) mixed errors, (3) subject-verb agreement errors, (4) run-on sentence errors, (5) spelling errors, (6) tense shifting, (7) pronoun-antecedent errors, and (8) misplaced modifiers. Given the same theme variations and instructions, the four-year group evaluated the following errors in descending order of severity: (1) sentence fragments, (2) mixed errors, (3) subject-verb agreement errors, (4) spelling errors, (5) tense shifting, (6) run-on sentence errors, (7) pronoun-antecedent errors, and (8) misplaced modifiers.

Freshman composition directors in the two-year and four-year institutions were in agreement that development of the idea and overall theme organization were the most important non-grammatical considerations in assigning a theme a grade. Moreover, following idea development and theme organization, the two-year and four-year groups agreed that paragraph organization, sentence structure, and transition, respectively, rank in order of importance. Although originality, general style, and word choice ranked of lesser importance to both groups than paragraph organization, sentence structure, and transition, originality was more significant to the two-year group than to the four-year group, while word choice was more significant to the four-year group than to the two-year group.

Freshman composition coordinators in the two-year and four-year institutions were in agreement that the most severe grammatical errors committed in writing were sentence fragments, mixed errors, and subject-verb agreement errors, respectively. In both groups, moreover, spelling errors, tense shifting, and run-on sentences were not considered as severe as sentence fragments, mixed errors, and subject-verb agreement errors. Finally, in both groups, pronoun-antecedent

errors and misplaced modifiers, respectively, were judged the least severe grammatical error types.

CONCLUSION

Based upon the findirgs of this research, it was concluded that no significant differences existed between first-semester freshman composition grading standards of the public two-year institutions and those of the public four-year institutions in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Moreover, based upon a mean analysis of the writing criteria of each group, evidence was found that general agreement existed between the two groups.

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